

## ***THE INEVITABILITY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: ITS IMAGE AND CHALLENGE REVISITED ||***

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### **Introduction**

**T**his article will discuss the factors behind the continuity of public administration, regardless it works or not. It is worth noting that this article only attempts to show the importance and the existence of public administration with regard to our anticipation for it to function in good faith. Before going any further, let us take a look at some of the definitions given to public administration.

One can find various definitions for public administration because it covers a broad range of perspectives and activities at all levels. It has a shared underlying concern of the political, economics and social context. One of the most influential efforts to define public administration offered by David H. Rosenbloom, in his book *Public Administration* is, “*Public administration is the use of managerial, political, and legal theories and processes to fulfill legislative, executive, and judicial governmental mandates for the provision of regulatory and service functions for the society as a whole or for some segments of it*” (Rosenbloom, 1993). From this holistic definition, it cannot be denied that mutual interdependency between the government and the people exists. Moreover, it appears that public administration is in the middle of a continuum, whereby the public is on one extreme and the government is on the other. Public administrators are therefore to fulfill the needs of both ends.

In a democratic society, public administrators must serve in the manner that will promote the very basic notion of democracy such that, all people must be served equally and impartially. However, the conducts of public administrators will inevitably be influenced by societal pressures, external controls, politics, and even the individuals’ motivation and attitude themselves. It was well put long ago by Paul H Appleby as cited in Martin, that “*Government administration differ from all other administrative work to a degree not even faintly realized outside, by the*

*virtue of its public nature, the way it is subject to public scrutiny and outcry. An administrator coming into government is struck at once, and continually thereafter by the press and the public interest in every detail of his life, personality and conduct” (Martin, 1965).*

## **The Essence of Public Administration**

When we talk about public administration, almost automatically ‘bureaucracy’ comes to mind. According to Ralph Hummel, as cited in Rosenbloom, *“bureaucracy is an efficient means for handling large numbers of people”* (Rosenbloom, 1989). Bureaucratic organization dates back to Max Weber’s ‘ideal type’ approach would be an impersonal, formalistic, rule-bound and highly disciplined organization. Nevertheless, the rigid characteristics are believed to produce a favorable result. This is because bureaucracy as a formal-legal structure is argued by many scholars as a desirable model of administration, such that bureaucrats are expected to be bounded by the explicit laws and regulations, the strict obedience to hierarchy and other legitimate authorities established to ensure work effectiveness. Although Weber’s structure of bureaucracy is debatable, it cannot be denied his credit, that many public organizations and administration in most countries still embrace this bureaucratic tradition.

The norms of public administration are rooted way back, whereby it is supposed to be organized around values like responsiveness, effectiveness, and accountability. Unfortunately, these values are not given adequate concern most of the times. The essential problems of public administration everywhere seem to be the inability to decide what to do rather than the complexity of the actual implementation process. Maintaining responsiveness and accountability has been and will always be the obligation of administrators at all levels as agents of public purpose in the services rendered and conforming to the collective will, as well as to avoid power abuse or unnecessary discretion into their own hands. Their objective, alas, must coincide with the public’s objective in promoting public interest (which in actuality is numerous indeed).

Nevertheless, the very size and technical character of bureaucracy in fact, makes this matter of accountability all the more vital. The notion of accountability in public administration according to Stephen Chee in his article, *Public Accountability in Malaysia: Form and Substances* as cited in Prodhan, stated that,

*“Public accountability is central to the practice of representative government and founded on the basic democratic ideal of responsibility. Although we shall use the terms ‘responsibility’ and*

*‘accountability’ interchangeably, it may be noted that the political and administrative responsibility carries a wider connotation of moral obligation, a sense of duty and responsiveness to the public interest, while accountability is sometimes narrowly conceived as the methods and procedures for enforcing responsibility among public officials to the citizenry”*

(Prodhan, 1991).

On the other hand, two other scholars, Carl Frederick and Herman Finer, both offered different positions regarding administrative responsibility and the proper forms of accountability. Frederick claimed that accountability in public administration could not be achieved through formal-legal institutions of control such as the government. Rather, it should depend upon one’s internal norms guarding the sense of duty to the public and one’s sense of responsibility to professional standards. Finer, however, totally disregarded the former’s position and argues that accountability must be governed by formal and external forms of control indeed (Prodhan, 1991).

What makes it more difficult is the fact that public administrators are also faced with the question of accountability towards two masters, the public as well as the political masters. By definition we would assume that ‘civil servants’ are accountable solely or with priority to the public, but in reality, tension must have surfaced between serving both masters. Public administrators are hence caught in the middle in their efforts and tasks to satisfy the public yet having to comply to their political masters, especially under certain circumstances when the ultimate objective of the two are not aligned.

The concern about the behavior of public administrators can be said as getting more ‘heat’ than ‘light’ constantly. We need to understand the extent to which their behavior conform or fail to conform to appropriate moral values. Peter G. Brown in his article entitled ‘*Assessing Officials*’ as cited in Fleishman, suggested that there are three questions to determine the extent to which one’s behavior can be evaluated with regard to moral values. They are:

- (i) How can we describe the circumstances under which problems of assessing the moral behavior of public officials arise?
- (ii) How might we characterize the methods by which one can decide which standards are relevant to which kinds of behavior, and
- (iii) How can we avoid unreasonable expectations about what such an analysis can accomplish? (Fleishman, 1981).

Ordinarily, there must be some kind of agreement that all the public want is for civil servants to dutifully satisfy their obligations in good faith. I mean that last

thing we want is for them to take liberty in pursuing their views of public interest. Consequently, moral dilemmas and conflict of interest often pose a threat in public administration. But then again, there must also be some general consensus that public administrators assume a great deal of responsibility for broader public purpose (that, unfortunately, or fortunately comes with their positions, depending on how you look at it). And because of that, they are therefore granted discretionary privilege over the substantial powers and resources of the government.

Since the capacity to do things for people is so much greater for public administrators than private individuals, the relative importance or emphasis of their duties and obligations therefore are also greater. They face a problem of performing simple duty to 'do good' in a complex undertaking of the general public. At times, Fleishman insisted that,

*“When there is a compelling need that they can satisfy, and when there is a reason to be distrustful of the process that would authorize action, officials may even be under some obligation on behalf of an overriding obligation to serve the public interest”*

(Fleishman, 1981).

It is worth noting that the notion of public interest is very cumbersome and subjective. Among others, one comprehensive definition of public interest in the context of public administration is what the official sincerely believes to be the long run benefit of the public as a whole or 'the greatest good for the greatest deserving number', over the longest possible range of time, while fully recognizing all the questions such a definition carries. Public administrators are obliged to pursue public interest but they too cannot escape several hurdles that lie before them.

## **Improving the Image**

This unglamorous job is tough but still someone has got to do it. Public administration is inevitable. The size of civil service in Malaysia alone is quite huge narrowing to a million. So, what keeps them survive? Among many things, what public administrators need is a little boost within their internal forces and some help from the external forces. Efforts to improve the image of public administrators do not require some magical or drastic change. Rather, a good grasp of the right norms coupled with a sound understanding on their obligations toward the public would be sufficient enough to produce reasonably good public administrators.

Before we go any further, let's take a look at the presumption on the somewhat tarnished image. We are probably familiar with some of the remarks the public have towards them. For instance,

*"Are you highly paid paper shufflers?"*

*"Are you unnecessary bureaucrats who simply delegate away your workload to the real workers?"*

*Are you the actual policy-maker behind the elected decision makers?*

*Are you surrogate politicians unwilling to meet the test of the ballot box?"*

(Roberts, 1996)

They may sound cynical but these are serious questions that could jeopardize the image of public administration. Although the comments stated above are those cited from the United States of America's public administration, similar responses might or may already exist here in our country. There is no big margin in distinguishing the reaction towards public administrators all over the world.

Public administrators at all levels have to be concerned about this. By and large, even if there are several honest and hard working individuals, their image are also at stake due to the few who gave that negative impression to the public. It is very unfortunate that public administrators will always be subjects for ongoing public scrutiny. The stigma has already been there for a long time. We seem to be stereotyping them every time something arises. The public is like 'a volcano waiting to erupt' whenever there is a fault brought into attention. Some measures have to be taken in order to curb this phenomenon from spreading. Once, Charles T. Goodsell, in his *Case for Bureaucracy* cynically said, *"To err is human, to make a career of it is government"* (Goodsell, 1996).

## **Civil Service Reforms**

The government, in its effort to boost the Malaysian public administration has come up with various civil service reforms. According to Tan Sri Dato Sri Ahmad Sarji, the former chief secretary of the Malaysian government, proposed that,

*"vision 2020 calls for the creation of society that is united, psychologically liberated, democratically matured, ethical, tolerant, caring, just and one that is competitive and resilient. To meet the strategic challenges for vision 2020, the public service has to be reformed into one that is more customer focused, results and performance oriented, responsive, accountable and innovative, and*

*the fostering of a new set of values amongst civil servants, around which a whole range of good administrative practices could be built upon”*

(Ahmad Sarji, 1996).

These reforms are mainly targeted at improving the public administrators' performance. The civil service in Malaysia needs these reforms to be able to shift from the rigid bureaucratic tradition to a more proactive, flexible and adaptable mode of operations. This paradigm shift has therefore redefined the boundaries of operations and created the environment for changes in the attitudes and behaviors of the civil servants. One of the earliest reforms made in this new paradigm shift era was the introduction of the Client Charter. The Client Charter, launched in 1993, is a written commitment made by all government agencies, pertaining to the delivery of product and services to their respective clients, namely the public. One cannot miss the visual displayed in almost every government agencies once entering them.

In other words, it is a gesture on behalf of the government through the agencies to assure that goods and services provided are at the highest standard of quality possible. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether or not the pledges are met accordingly. Moreover, clients are entitled to evaluate the performance of the services rendered to them. As a result, the impressions they have during their encounters with the agencies will contribute to the image of civil servants. The formulation of the Client Charter itself however, is not enough to guarantee that public is indeed getting a desirable service as proclaimed in the charter. The implementation is more important in order to win the trust and confidence of the public. To avoid the pledges from becoming mere slogans, the top management will have to play their part in ensuring that the public administrators do deliver their services as promised.

The public in addition is offered alternative channels to voice out their grievances, for instance through the Public Complaints Bureau (PCB). The PCB which acts as an '*ombudsman*', is a branch of the Prime Ministers Department. Its objective is to assist public with any problem pertaining to public administration, and to take proper action against the complaints (provided the complaints are sound and within the bureau's jurisdiction). Among cases that cannot be pursued however, are those regarding specific government policy, the General Audit Bureau, the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the Legal Aid Bureau. Besides that, personal problems and complaints against private organizations are also beyond its capacity. Nevertheless, with the existence of the PCB, the public has at least been equipped with proper channel to forward their dissatisfaction.

## **Justification of ‘Myth’ or ‘Reality’**

Do we really have problems with our civil service or not? When the Client Charter and the Public Complaints Bureau were both launched in early 1990’s, we can see that there were a considerable number of complaints received against the civil service. From 1993 to 1995 for instance, there was a steady increase in the number of cases reported at the PCB’s northern region branch. There were 822 complaints altogether within the three years, 222 in 1993, up to 244 in 1994, and almost fifty percent increment in 1995, with 356 complaints (PCB Annual Reports, 1993-1995). Most of the complaints were against various federal agencies followed by the state administrations. The nature of complaints made were basically the same. Among others:

- (i) Delay in carrying out official duties
- (ii) Unfair actions or decisions
- (iii) Lack of hospitality
- (iv) Abuse of power
- (v) Misconduct and inefficiency
- (vi) Failure to enforce laws and regulations

Delay in carrying out official duties by government agencies in both state and federal level seemed to be the biggest problem. They made up more than half of the types of complaints received overall. Generally, the PCB has been quite successful in handling the complaints. In 1995 for instance, out of the total 356 cases, 253 were resolved. Although the number of complaints has reduced a little in the late 1990’s, the nature of complaints remain the same. One might argue the statistics do not represent the general public’s perception, but they may still reflect a negative image on public administration as a whole. Hence, how can we prevent the stereotype of this ‘somewhat tarnished’ image? The panacea might just be as simple as logical reasoning but indeed very difficult to accomplish. By that, I mean getting back to square one, adopting a positive self-concept maybe. Let us think about it for a while.

## **Promoting the Internal Forces**

Internal forces or the ‘inner-checks’ of an individual is very strong in determining which direction one chooses to pursue, or actions one chooses to take. Some of these internal forces are better known as motivation, morale, and integrity. We are probably familiar with lots of explanations and write-ups on motivation so far. In short, motivation is the willingness to expend effort and energy to attain result or outcome which is expected to be satisfying the ‘need’. When we talk about

motivation in the field of organization, we mean those processes within an individual that stimulate behavior and channel it in ways that should be beneficial to both individual and organization, ideally. According to John B. Miner, in his book *Industrial Organizational Psychology*, “*Internally, individual processes may set this motivational forces in motion and maintain them or they may be activated by external influences such as a supervisor’s warnings*” (Miner, 1992).

Several motivation theories were developed earlier in the attempt to explain the dynamics that operate within individuals, whether they are induced internally or externally. Motivation is not the only determinant of an individual’s behavior. The notion of morale and integrity are also important criteria leading to one’s attitude and behavior. Just as public administration is essential to the collective operations of a nation, so are elements of morale and work-centered motivation vital to administration. In a broader sense, morale can be expressed as “*Loyalty, enthusiasm, cooperation, pride in the services, and devotion to duty*” (Stahl, 1971).

### **Incorporating the External Forces**

Besides emphasis on the internal forces, undoubtedly the external forces such as conducive work environment and incentives can play an important part in producing an excellent public administration. Public administrators will undeniably be working in a bureaucratic setting, which is known to be quite a ‘challenge’. However, if the work place, relationship among colleagues, subordinates, and supervisors are harmonious, they could positively affect a person’s motivation and overall performance. Then, directly or indirectly, this satisfaction would benefit all parties involved, whether the organization, the workers or the public.

No organization can escape making judgment about the behavior and performance of its staff. Any kind of incentive or remuneration will ultimately depend upon such appraisals. The purpose of incentive is supposedly to maintain or improve performance and to support supervisory responsibility for the effectiveness of the work performed, as well as to ensure reasonable equity and dignity in human relations (Stahl, 1971). As we all know, government positions are usually not highly compensated, salary wise. Therefore, other forms of recognition must be incorporated to induce positive responses and work satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, what we have discussed in this paper are only insights, presumptions, and suggestions. In reality, what has been going on will probably continues unless



we can all ‘*wake up and smell the coffee*’. Hopefully the public will come to terms with the essence of public administration as a system and public administrators as a whole. The civil service reforms introduced may take a while in their implementation process, coupled with the ever-existing ‘barrier’ of attitudes and norms before we could really witness a more favorable outcome. As long as there is an attempt to make improvements, it is considered good enough. After all, nothing venture nothing gain, right. Any major change has to begin with a small change first. Moreover, public consciousness can play important role in bringing out a quality public administration.

I must say I agree with Frederick Herzberg’s theory on work motivation. It makes sense that although we need to fulfill the ‘Hygienes’ (extrinsic) factors as much as possible, in the end it is the ‘Motivators’ (intrinsic motivating factors) that will prevail in the long run. Therefore, management must balance these two factors and try to encourage the intrinsic factors to the fullest. Last but not least, I would like to share this quote by Paul H. Appleby, as cited in Martin, on some of his notions of ‘The Good Administrator’ and maybe eventually we too could reach that ideal public administration:

- (i) A good administrator is one who aims at effectiveness and avoids using power or authority for their own sake;
- (ii) A good administrator does not discourage, but positively welcomes reports of troublesome things lest they reach unmanageable dimensions before he hears of them; and
- (iii) A good administrator tirelessly pursues means of improving administration of all for which he is responsible (Martin, 1965).

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